



Croatia – Introducing and strengthening the non-university sector

*One of twelve case studies
produced as part of the
project on Structural
Reform in Higher Education
(EAC-2014-0474)*

April 2016

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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2015

ISBN: 978-92-79-55123-9

doi: 10.2766/79662

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Introduction

This case study is part of the “Structural Higher Education Reform – Design and Evaluation” project, commissioned by the European Commission (EAC/31/2014). The main objective of this project – carried out by the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), University of Twente, the Netherlands, and the Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent (CHEGG), Ghent University, Belgium – is to investigate policy processes related to the design, implementation, and evaluation of structural reforms of higher education systems. The focus is on government-initiated reform processes that were intended to change the higher education landscape, with the following questions foremost: What kind of goals were envisaged with the structural reform? How was the structural reform planned and implemented? What have been the achievements of the structural reforms? How can these achievements be explained in terms of policy process factors?

Three types of reform were distinguished: reforms designed to increase horizontal differentiation (developing or strengthening new types of higher education institutions such as the creation of a professional higher education sector), reforms designed to increase vertical differentiation (bringing about quality or prestige differences between higher education institutions, e.g. by creating centres of excellence) and reforms designed to increase interrelationships between institutions (supporting cooperation and coordination among institutions, forming alliances or mergers). In total, structural reforms in twelve different countries (eleven in Europe, one in Canada) were investigated: Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Canada (Alberta), Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, United Kingdom (Wales). The twelve case studies – for ease of reference published as separate documents – all follow the same logic and are presented in a similar format, with sections relating to the reform and its context, policy goals, policy design, policy instruments, policy implementation, policy evaluation and goal achievement.

Croatia – Introducing and strengthening the non-university sector

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Introduction to the structural reform and its main goals

The structural reform in Croatian higher education concerns non-university higher education provision, and aims at increased horizontal differentiation. It has been embedded in more general reforms related to establishing higher education in the newly independent Croatia in the 1990s, regional economic development, Croatian participation in the Bologna Process in the 2000s and the overall process of EU accession. As will be explained in this report, this has been a recurring reform focus in Croatia during the last two decades.

The strategic goals of the reform correspond to the strategic goals of the more general reforms and include: ensuring the effective contribution of higher education to developing Croatia as a knowledge-based society within the EU, increasing the quality of education as well as its efficiency and accessibility, decreasing regional differences in development and education attainment, and providing additional opportunities for adults who possess only secondary education qualifications.

The overall operational goal of the reform concerns the introduction of non-university higher education institutions in Croatia and the gradual abolishment of professional programmes in universities, which in more recent years has been formulated in more moderate terms as allowing professional programmes in universities only as an exception. This operational goal was complemented in the 2000s with the goal of strengthening the non-university sector by increasing the number of HEIs and the share of student population enrolled in the non-university sector.

The recurring attempts to achieve the operational and strategic goals primarily relied on changing the legislation and other forms of regulation dealing with accreditation of higher education programmes and institutions. These changes, in particular those concerning abolishing professional programmes in universities, were seldom fully implemented because, as will be explained, there has been resistance from the university sector, while the Constitutional Court interpreted these changes in legislation as violating the constitutional principle of autonomy and academic freedom.

Context and background to the reform

The Croatian higher education system comprises a total of 48 higher education institutions (Table 1). The important distinctions concerning types of institutions are (a) between public and private institutions, and (b) between universities and non-university institutions. The first distinction – between public and private – concerns founding and ownership; institutions founded by the state are considered public, while institutions founded by private persons as well as institutions founded by the local (municipal) authorities or the church are effectively considered private. The second distinction relates to research activities and the types of studies an

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institution is allowed to organise. Universities conduct research and are also allowed to organise PhD studies. Concerning first and second cycle, universities can organise both academic and professional studies. Non-university institutions are allowed to organise only the first two cycles of professional studies. Thus, the system in Croatia can be considered binary, although the fact that universities can also organise professional studies blurs the binary divide.

This situation has its origins in the time during which Croatia was still part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Although predecessors of non-university institutions have existed in Croatia since WWII, they were (a) not considered part of the higher education system, but rather as post-secondary education and (b) almost completely dissolved in the late 1980s, either by being amalgamated into universities or by disappearing altogether (Reichard, 1992).

Table 1 – Number of higher education institutions in Croatia.

Type of institution	Public	Private	Total
University²	7	3	10
Non-university³	14	24	38
Total	21	27	48

Source: ASHE.

Currently, there are 1,335 study programmes accredited by the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) in Croatia. Of those, 1,108 are academic programmes organised by universities, while 227 are professional programmes organised in both the university and non-university sectors (see Table 2 for details concerning professional programmes).

Table 2 – Type of professional programmes per type of institution.

Type of professional programme	University		Non-university ⁴		TOTAL
	Public	Private	Public	Private	
Short-cycle (2.5 years)	1	0	0	0	1
1st cycle	47	7	56	47	157
2nd cycle	15	0	26	28	69
TOTAL	63	7	82	75	227

Source: ASHE.

² Although individual university faculties have legal independence and therefore can be considered as institutions themselves, in this report they are not counted separately.

³ This includes both polytechnics – which need at least three accredited study programmes in order to be licensed for operation (i.e. accredited as institutions), and schools of professional higher education – which need only one study programme.

⁴ Both polytechnics and schools of professional higher education.

As can be seen, almost one-third of professional programmes are provided by universities. However, concerning the student population, according to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (CBS),⁵ in the 2013/2014 academic year⁶:

- 67.7% of the total student population of Croatia attended academic programmes provided by universities,
- 10.6% attended professional programmes provided by universities,
- 21.7% attended professional programmes provided by the non-university sector.

This indicates that universities enrol almost 80% of the entire student population, and almost one-third of the student body is enrolled in professional study programmes.

The two distinctions – between (1) the university and non-university sectors and (2) academic and professional programmes – are referred to by some interviewed experts as ‘the double binary divide’, introduced in order to increase horizontal differentiation. However, as will be explained below, the overlap between the two distinctions complicates the binary divide, primarily because the universities are allowed to offer professional study programmes which are very similar to the academic programmes in the same study field offered by these universities.

Design process for the reform

The actors involved in designing the structural reform were: (1) the Ministry responsible for higher education (currently: Ministry of Science, Education and Sports), (2) the National Council for Research, Higher Education and Technological Development (NCHE), (3) the Croatian Rectors’ Conference, (4) the Council of Polytechnics and Professional Schools of Higher Education, (5) the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE), (6) the Constitutional Court, and (7) the Croatian Parliament. However, not all of these collective actors were equally involved in the design process and some have a more prominent role in the process of implementation (see below).

The academic community wielded significant power in designing the reform by influencing in particular the Ministry, the Constitutional Court and the Parliament. The influence of the academic community in the design of the reform is, on the one hand, related to the development of initial legislative proposals and strategic documents. Furthermore, the interviewed experts indicate that the Ministry and the Government are reluctant to resist the will of the universities too strongly, in particular the flagship University of Zagreb, which is the *alma mater* of the majority of the political elite. On the other hand, the academic community also exerts power by effectively re-designing policy instruments during the implementation phase. It does so by pushing for legislative amendments in the Croatian Parliament or by submitting complaints to the Constitutional Court concerning specific legislative

⁵ http://www.dzs.hr/Hrv_Eng/publication/2014/SI-1523.pdf (page accessed 20 October 2015)

⁶ Data on student numbers reported by ASHE (citing the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports as the source) and data on student numbers reported by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics do not match. For example, the difference between the total number of students (including postgraduate students) reported by the two sources for the 2013/2014 academic year differ by more than 12,000 students: 166,061 (CBS) compared to 178,676 (ASHE). This report relies on CBS data.

provisions, in this case those concerning the abolition of professional studies in universities.

The non-university sector seems to be a relatively weak actor in the process, though its presence and strength has been slowly increasing. There are at least three reasons for this. First, they are relatively young institutions (most of them were established in the second half of the 2000s), with significant differences among them in terms of how well they are established, as well as their perceived quality and status (almost all private institutions are non-university institutions). Second, universities enjoy far more legitimacy as a collective voice of higher education, given that they are primarily academic institutions (unlike the non-university sector which is primarily professional), but also given their size and historical legacy. Third, the involvement of non-university actors in the policy design process seems to be related to the personal characteristics and connections of individuals in leadership positions in the sector rather than their acting as representatives of a well-organised sector. All these factors hinder stronger cohesion among non-university higher education institutions as a collective of organisations, as well as within their representative structure.

Given the embeddedness of the structural reform in the more general reforms of higher education and the dominance of universities in the system, the reform discussions primarily focus on changes in the university sector. This means that the discussions related to horizontal differentiation, although continuously present, are essentially of secondary importance. Different policy options are very seldom discussed explicitly. This is partly due to limiting the focus of the policy design process to changes in legislation without necessarily developing overarching strategic documents (e.g. white papers) first.

In general, there does not seem to be a formalised, institutionalised approach to designing reforms, which limits the possibilities for weaker actors to take part and influence the process. Thus, although the interests of various actors in the design process are not convergent – e.g. the non-university sector wants to be the sole providers of professional programmes, and at times this seems to have been the intention of the Ministry as well, while the universities want to keep their professional programmes – this divergence in interests is not so visible. The dominance of the academic community in the policy arena also means that consensus-building efforts in designing reforms essentially come down to ensuring the support of the universities. In the few cases when this was not done, the academic community sought to protect its interests by involving the Constitutional Court (see below concerning the 2000 and 2006 decisions of the court).

The information basis used for designing the reform was initially rather weak given the limited analytical capacity of buffer structures and the Ministry (Orosz, 2008). However, the situation is gradually improving given the establishment of ASHE, the increasing prominence of policy analysts within universities or within independent think tanks (Zgaga, 2013), and the existence of many externally (EU) funded projects focusing on the analysis of higher education. The available information remains far from complete and, given the weak institutionalisation and formalisation of the policy design process, there is no assurance that the collected information will be used effectively in the future to evaluate different policy options.

The outcome of such interaction patterns means that the overall changes in higher education and the structural reforms aimed at horizontal differentiation in particular are strongly steered by the academic community, which effectively means that the various actors formally tasked with making specific decisions (Parliament for

legislation, Ministry and the NCHE for other forms of regulation and procedures), decide predominantly in the interest of universities. The dominance of universities leads to a situation in which no radical changes are possible, with the resulting incrementalism not so much a consequence of risk aversion (i.e. consideration of possible negative outcomes), but rather a consequence of significant power asymmetry in the policy arena.

Policy instruments used

The structural reform in Croatia relied primarily on legislation and other forms of regulation.

In 1993, the first law concerning higher education in the newly independent Croatia was adopted by the Croatian Parliament. It introduced the distinction between university and non-university higher education institutions, as well as the distinction between academic and professional studies. Universities could provide both types of studies, while the non-university sector could provide only professional studies. However, the legislation also postulated that professional studies at universities were to be gradually abolished by the 1999/2000 academic year. Legislative changes in 1995 extended this deadline until 2002/2003. Changes adopted by the Parliament in 1996 introduced tracking between secondary and higher education, foreseeing that a three-year apprenticeship education was sufficient to enrol in professional study programmes, while a four-year secondary education was a necessary prerequisite to enrol in academic programmes. According to the interviewed experts, this contributed to the perception that professional studies were of lower quality.

Attempts to abolish professional studies at universities were hindered by the 2000 decision of the Croatian Constitutional Court. The Court argued that limiting the types of studies universities can organise is unconstitutional in response to a complaint that several provisions of the law were essentially violating the principle of autonomy guaranteed by the Croatian constitution.

In 2001 Croatia joined the Bologna Process and the new legislation, which introduced the Bologna degree structure as well as accreditation of institutions and study programmes, was adopted in 2003 by the Croatian Parliament. The legislation clearly stated that universities are expected to provide academic study programmes (three cycles), while non-university institution's programmes are vocational (two cycles) and that professional programmes at universities should be abolished by the 2010/2011 academic year. Possibilities for vertical mobility between the two types remained asymmetrical; enrolling in the second professional cycle was possible with either a professional or an academic first cycle degree, while enrolling in an academic second cycle programme was possible only if the first degree was also from an academic study programme.

These renewed attempts to clarify the binary divide by aligning the distinction between types of institutions and the distinction between types of programmes, was again hindered by the Constitutional Court, which decided in 2006 that such legislative provisions were unconstitutional (citing also the decision from 2000 as legitimisation).

In 2009, a special law dealing only with quality assurance in higher education and research was adopted. The legislation defined in more detail the elements of the QA system, the key provision in this context being the freedom of universities to develop their own study programmes and not be subjected to programme

accreditation, while non-university institutions were expected to undergo re-accreditation of their study programmes every 5 years.

In light of the new legislation focusing only on quality assurance, ASHE and NCHE prepared the document 'Network of HEIs and study programmes in Croatia', which was adopted by the Croatian Parliament in 2011. The document was expected to guide NCHE decisions on programme accreditation and, by extension, decisions concerning allocation of public funding for higher education, given that students in each accredited programme in a public institution were automatically included in input-based funding allocations. The document re-iterated the need to gradually abolish professional programmes in universities and to strengthen non-university institutions, in particular those operating outside the capital region. The document also included 16 criteria to assess whether a study programme was needed in a particular region. These included aspects related to staff and infrastructural capacity, existing supply of similar programmes in the region and the whole country, student interest in these programmes, compatibility with local, regional and national development strategies, and foreseen costs. Compliance with the criteria was to be evaluated by the NCHE.

The legislation on the Croatian qualifications framework, adopted in 2013, clarified the linkages between the Croatian degree system and the EQF and QF-EHEA. The short cycle professional qualifications were thus equated with EQF level 5 (QF-EHEA sublevel 1), academic and professional first cycle degrees with EQF level 6 (QF-EHEA level 1), and so on. The legislation also reinforced asymmetric opportunities for mobility between university and non-university programmes; transfer from the former to the latter was possible, but not the other way around.

Reliance on legislation and other forms of regulation reflects the type of policy instruments relied upon also in the former Yugoslavia. While different policy actors seem to acknowledge the importance of money – additional revenue from professional study programmes is one reason universities do not want to abolish professional study programmes – changes in the funding mechanisms (mechanisms and criteria for allocation of public funding) do not seem to have been considered, probably because of the vested interests of the most powerful actor in the arena. Similarly, information tools have been underutilised thus far, although some policy actors (e.g. the Ministry) have high expectations from various cooperation projects (largely funded by the EU). In addition, there is an expectation that over time the Council of Polytechnics and Schools of Professional Higher Education will grow into a more powerful representative of the non-university sector, able to act as a platform for sharing experiences and good practices.

Implementation of the reform

The collective actors involved in the implementation process were to a large extent the same as those involved in the design process, with two necessary caveats. First, the role of the Croatian Parliament and the Constitutional Court primarily concerned re-designing policy instruments during implementation, notably by amending legislation or by blocking implementation through jurisprudence. Second, the municipal authorities also played a limited role in implementation, given that they have the power to establish non-university higher education institutions.

The implementation process relied in particular on ASHE, which is responsible for accreditation and external evaluation of institutions (both sectors) and of programmes (non-university sector only). In this work, ASHE relies on the 2009

Law on Quality Assurance of Higher Education and criteria and procedures adopted by the NCHE for programme and institutional accreditation.

All institutions need to undergo initial accreditation (completed) as well as re-accreditation every five years (the first re-accreditation cycle is soon to be completed). Given that universities do not need to accredit their programmes, they only require special permission by the NCHE to establish professional study programmes. As indicated above, this decision to award such special permission is formally based on the aforementioned 2011 'Network of HEIs and study programmes in Croatia'. While in principle this was expected to ensure quality, relevance and justified public spending, in practice all requests made by universities to establish new study programmes have been approved, which resulted in a proliferation of study programmes, in particular within universities. This effectively limited the prospects of the non-university sector for future expansion.

The problem seems to be less a lack of clarity of policy instruments, and more a fact that initial ideas of policy-makers become diluted through universities' dominance in the policy arena. Significant changes in how resources are allocated do not seem possible, and thus the reforms end up benefitting the most powerful actor in the arena – universities – but not other actors (in particular the non-university sector), nor the system as a whole (though a specific analysis of cost-benefits at the system level is currently unavailable).

In light of the described distribution of power between the different actors, it is difficult to designate the implementation process as clearly top-down or clearly bottom-up. Rather, there is a continued political process, with some actors undermining the implementation. However, when it comes to public non-university institutions, they are clearly subordinate to the Ministry and the NCHE. No formal structure specifically tasked with overseeing implementation has been appointed. Given its role in accreditation, the best placed actor to monitor implementation is ASHE, but as an advisory and expert structure, it does not have the power to make decisions which could facilitate implementation.

Monitoring, evaluation and feedback

Policy evaluation is not systematically organised in Croatia. ASHE develops thematic reports on external evaluations of HEIs and study programmes but an institutionalised use of these reports does not seem to be in place. Data collected through research projects, often funded by the EU, primarily serve to strengthen the still rather weak information base and are used primarily in identification of policy problems, and not explicitly as policy evaluation tools (see for example the ACCESS project).⁷

Additional challenges with regards to policy evaluation and monitoring stem from the aforementioned embeddedness of the structural reform in the more general reform initiatives and, perhaps more importantly, from the fact that very few specific indicators of reform success are defined and measured. In addition, according to the interviewed experts, a study tracing the trajectories of non-university graduates on the labour market is being conducted, with the first results expected in late 2015.

⁷ <http://www.tempus-access.info/english/> (page accessed 12 October 2015)

Important changes in context for the reform

The push for more horizontal differentiation in Croatia has been present since the early 1990s and has always been embedded in more general reform initiatives, even more so after 2000 when the regime change in Croatia gave new impetus to societal reforms in general and reforms of higher education in particular. The European policy developments, primarily the Bologna Process but also the EU's increasing focus on knowledge as the key factor in economic and social development, came at an opportune time and provided an overarching frame for the reform efforts. They also provided specific models that were emulated in the Croatian context, such as the types of programmes reflecting the Bologna degree structure, the elements of the QA system resonating with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG) and the EQF and QF-EHEA providing the necessary push and a usable template for developing the Croatian Qualifications Framework.

Achievements and effects

The fact that in the 1990s there were almost no non-university higher education institutions and now there are 38 may be interpreted as achievement of at least one operational goal of the reform – the introduction of the non-university sector. Most of the currently operating non-university institutions were established in the second half of the 2000s, with the number doubling between 2005 and 2011.

Concerning student numbers (Figure 1), the proportion of students enrolled in professional programmes organized by the universities has declined from 17% to 11% over 10 years. The proportion of students enrolled in professional programmes provided by the non-university sector fluctuated in the same period between 19% and 23% (currently 22%).

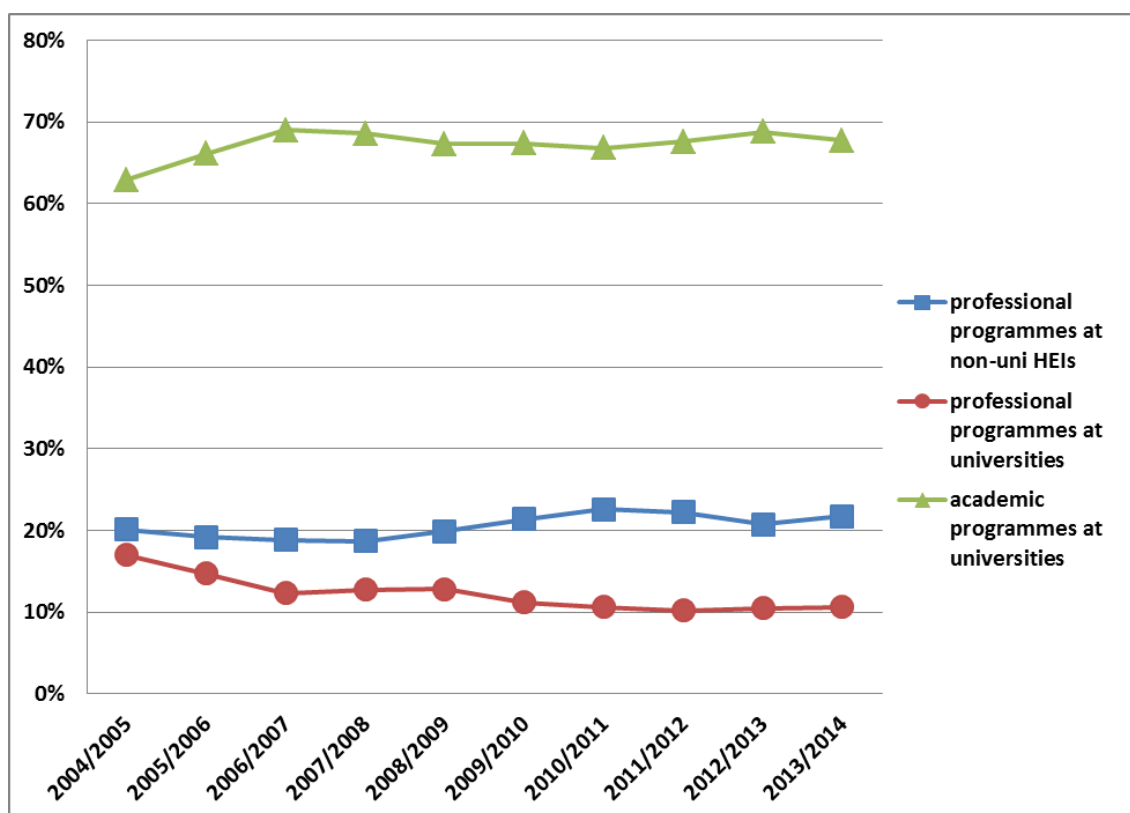


Figure 1 – Proportion of students according to type of programme and type of institution (postgraduate students not included). Source: CBS.

However, it should be noted that in the same period there has been an increase in the overall student numbers (Figure 2), primarily related to increases in the enrolment in professional programmes in the non-university sector and academic programmes provided by universities. The number of students in professional programmes at universities decreased from approximately 22,000 in 2004/2005 to just over 17,000 in 2013/2014.

Overall, the data seems to indicate that in recent years fewer students study in professional programmes organized by the universities, both in relative and in absolute terms. However, they still constitute one-third of all students in professional programmes, suggesting that the operational goal to phase-out professional programmes in universities – by allowing them only as an exception given special permission by NCHE – has yet to be achieved.

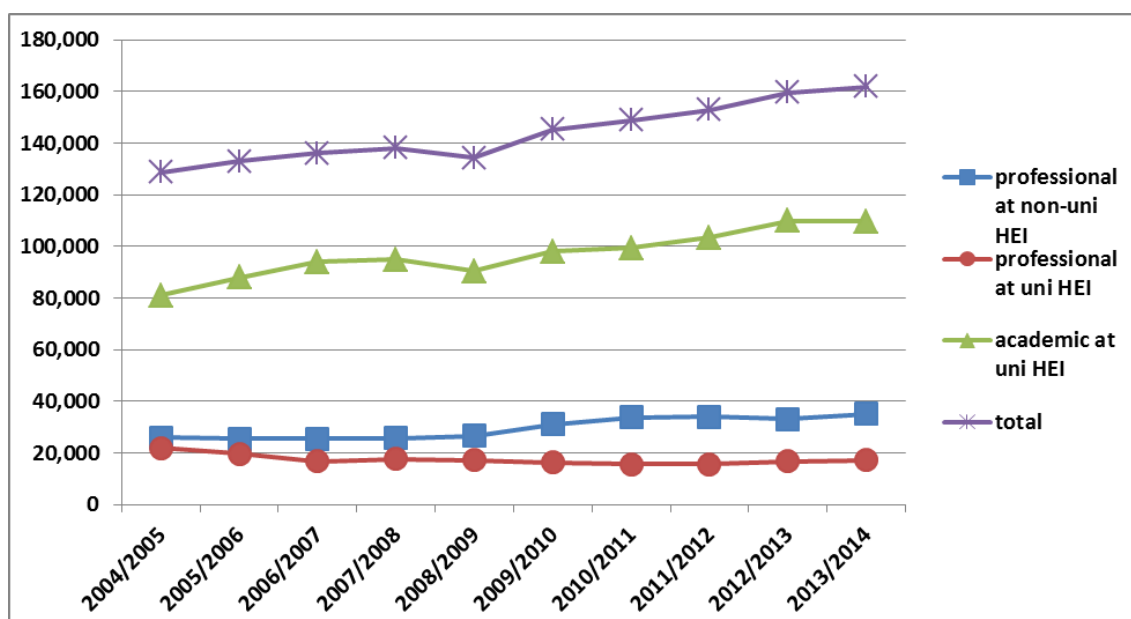


Figure 2 – Number of students according to type of programme and type of institution (postgraduate students not included). Source: CBS.

Concerning the strategic goals, it is not possible to systematically assess their achievement for three inter-related reasons:

- The lack of systematic evaluation of reforms which means there are no available studies that such an assessment can rely on;
- The weak information basis of the higher education system as a whole, in particular before the establishment of ASHE, which means that a longitudinal analysis necessary for identifying changes is not possible; and
- The embeddedness of the structural reform in the more general reforms, which means that clear causal linkages between identified changes and this specific structural reform cannot be made.

This is in particular evident when trying to assess the achievement of one of the key strategic aims of higher education reforms in general – increase of education attainment of the Croatian population, in particular in the active workforce. Comparing census data from 2001 and 2011 (Croatian Bureau of Statistics), it seems that the situation has indeed improved: approx. 12% of the population had a higher education degree in 2001, while in 2011 about 25% of the population possessed at least a first cycle degree. However, it is difficult to make a clear causal link between these changes and the structural reforms, given that the effects of demographic changes have not been systematically studied and that part of these changes could be an effect of introducing the Bologna degree structure in the whole system, and not just the structural reforms analysed in this report.

Apart from these obstacles, there are additional characteristics of the system set-up which cast doubt on to what extent the strategic goals can be achieved, for example the goal to increase accessibility of higher education in particular in areas in which education attainment has been low and in which there has been no higher education provision before. While the bulk of the provision is still concentrated in the capital city, each administrative region now has at least one institution, which was not the case in the early 2000s. Moreover, keeping in mind that the non-

university sector actually caters to students of lower socio-economic background (Cvitan, Doolan, Farnell, & Matković, 2011), one would expect that expanded provision outside of the capital region could potentially improve access overall.

However, there are two challenges concerning this. In some regions, the expansion of provision is rather narrow, relying on only one institution with a limited offer of study programmes (in 1-2 areas), primarily in social sciences (economics) and nursing. Moreover, the tuition fees in non-university institutions, particularly private institutions, are higher than in universities (Cvitan et al., 2011; Doolan, Dolenec, & Domazet, 2011), which means that under the current funding arrangements non-university programmes may actually be less accessible to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Concerning unintended effects of the reforms, the privileged position of universities in the system, coupled with the persisting public perception that universities provide higher education of better quality, seems to have contributed to academic drift. One such example concerns the establishment of another public university in the north of Croatia (Sveučilište Sjever) through transformations of several non-university institutions in the region. In addition, some polytechnics have been including an 'upgrade' to university in their strategic plans (e.g. one of the larger private polytechnics in Zagreb, VERN) and some have been considering obtaining accreditation to conduct (applied) research which might be the first step towards becoming a university.

Summary

This case described and analysed the developments related to the non-university sector in Croatia since the mid-1990s. These developments included the establishment of a number of non-university higher education institutions which provide professional programmes, and attempts to gradually abolish provision of such programmes in universities with an aim to strengthen the non-university sector further. In strategic terms, these reforms aimed at ensuring a higher education contribution to the regionally-balanced development of Croatia as a knowledge society, increasing the quality, efficiency and accessibility of higher education. The reform comprised regulatory policy instruments (system level legislation and procedures and criteria for accreditation), with no reliance on arguably more effective policy instruments related to the allocation of resources (funding). The reform has achieved only a small part of its operational goals, establishing some non-university institutions and somewhat decreasing the number of students enrolled in professional programmes at universities. However, the reform failed to align the distinction between types of institutions and types of programmes and the binary divide thus remains blurred.

This structural reform has continuously been embedded in more general reform efforts, but this may have been a double-edged sword: on the one hand, providing impetus for the structural reform, but on the other hand making the effects of these reform efforts less visible due to the strong focus on the reform of universities. The situation in which the aims of the structural reforms are continuously re-iterated and the most powerful actor in the system continuously manages to 'dilute' these aims and keep its privileged position points to the necessity of bringing this most powerful actor more fully on board. Since professional programmes are also a source of income for universities, the policy-makers may need to consider offering alternative financial incentives as 'part of the deal'.

Interviewees

MSc. S. Bezjak, Deputy Director of the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE)

Prof. S. Ćosović Bajić, Chair of the Council polytechnics and schools of professional HE; Dean of Polytechnic of Zagreb (public non-university HEI)

Prof. V. Cvrtila, Dean of VERN (private non-university HEI based in Zagreb), former professor at the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Zagreb

Prof. M. Jelić, Dean of Polytechnic of Knin (public non-university HEI in Knin, one of the poorest regions of Croatia)

A. Tecilazić Goršić, Ministry of Science, Education and Sports; Head of Department for higher education quality, international cooperation and European initiatives

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⁸ Numbers indicate volumes and issues of the Official Gazette of Croatia.

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doi: 10.2766/17945
ISBN: 978-92-79-55117-8